

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

July 20, 2018

Wanted: Correctional Officers: Starting Pay \$15.00/hr,  
\$2,000 Signing bonus and a Chance to Earn \$175,000 Per Year

The Wisconsin DOC is severely understaffed. The DOC cannot seem to find enough people willing to be prison guards. They claim that wages are not competitive. As a result, guards are putting in lots of overtime - \$42 million worth in 2017. The leading overtime earner was a guard in Redgranite prison. He averaged 95 hours per week and earned nearly \$175,000 for the year. In 2016 and 2015, he earned \$80,000 and \$72,000 respectively.

However, he was not the only one who knocked down big bucks for overtime last year. A guard in Columbia Prison earned \$169,000 while another officer in Dodge prison earned \$168,000. Also, a Central State Nurse Clinician earned \$216,000. All three of them were paid over \$100,000 in overtime wages. 35 state workers (most of them DOC employees) earned over \$50,000 in overtime pay alone.

Why is it so hard to hire new guards? In my opinion, it is the way guards are trained and how they are told to treat prisoners. I believe that most potential guards balk at the dehumanizing methods they are taught to use when dealing with prisoners. New guards come in with a Rambo/life-on-the-line mentality drummed into them at the academy. When they arrive at a prison there is a big disconnect between what they were told to do and the reality of prison.

We are not subhuman monsters. Most new staff see that right away and become more humane. But prison administrators don't want guards to treat prisoners with dignity and respect (in spite of the rhetoric). So the conflict arises within each new officer. This, I believe is what causes so many to quit.

Let me say, it wasn't always like this. Prison administrators used to emphasize compassionate and fair treatment. But 30 years of increasingly oppressive policies have eliminated the humane administrators. None are left but the ones who believe prisoners were sent to prison - not a punishment, but to be punished. But I digress.

What I really wanted to talk about is the long term effects of allowing guards to earn in excess of \$100,000 per year. To calculate a guard's potential pension benefit, the DOC takes the average of their 3 highest earning years and bases the amount of pension of that average. It then pays them a percentage (I believe it's 60%) of that wage for the rest of the retiree's life.

Take for instance the guard who earned \$175,000 last year. If the last 3 years were his 3 highest years, it would give an average of \$109,000 per year. 60% of that is \$65,400. He would receive that much every year for the rest of his life. In a little over 15 years he would have been paid \$1 million in pension benefits. What if he lives another 30 or more years? What if there are hundreds (if not thousands) of other retired DOC employees receiving that much pension?

Now you know why the DOC budget is over \$1 billion per year.